

the first YL



Ron HAM

No doubt most of us remember the excitement of our first short-wave receiver, and the thrill of hearing radio signals from the far corners of the earth.

About 55 years ago, a young lady, Barbara Mary Dunn, entered the new and exciting world of short-wave radio at a time, when in addition to the names and call-signs of its own, now famous, founder members, the RSGB call-book listed such names as Capt P. P. Eckersley, 2OO and J. Scott-Taggart, 2LR, along with such firms as British Thomson-Houston, 2ZI, Marconi Wireless Telegraph Co. Ltd., Writtle, 2BO and Metropolitan Vickers Electric Co. Ltd., 2AC.

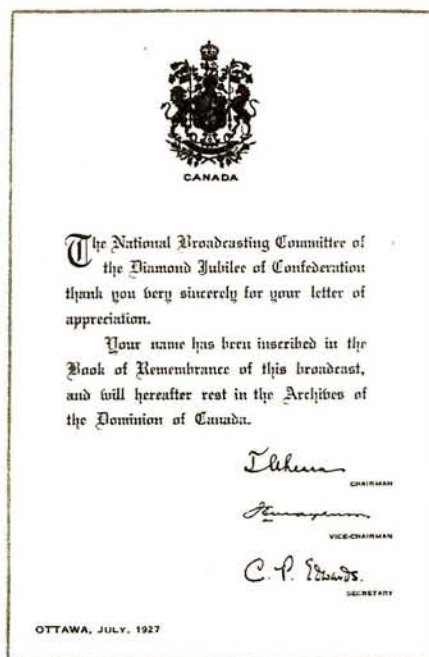
In 1927, the Radio Society of Great Britain and Printing Craft Ltd. jointly produced a foolscap sized "Annual Diary and Log Book" which contained the call-book, was well supported by component advertisers and cost three shillings and sixpence (17½p). On 24 August 1926, Guglielmo Marconi wrote to Printing Craft Ltd.

"By combining information, useful tables and data with a practically ruled-and-printed daily logging chart covering the full twelvemonth of the year, the Official Diary and Log Book you are bringing out in conjunction with the Radio Society of Great Britain should prove of great use to the increasing army of investigators and others interested in the Science of Radio Transmission and Reception."

Positive Reporting

This is precisely what fascinated Barbara Dunn because her early log books, now in the author's collection, show extensive reports about signals she received from amateur, aeronautical, broadcasting, experimental and maritime stations, always accompanied by the prevailing atmospheric and weather conditions and any appropriate press cuttings. One of the many historic broadcasts she heard was on 26 metres, between 0330 and 0630 on 2 July 1927, when a programme from Ottawa, celebrating the "Diamond Jubilee of Confederation" was relayed by the Marconi Beam Station, Drummondville, Quebec. At the end of this transmission she heard Drummondville call up stations in Mexico and New Zealand thanking them for reports and asking listeners in general for further reports. True to form, Barbara replied and her extensive report was acknowledged with the official commemoration card and an engineering card.

In those early years interesting things, which we take so much for granted today, were happening all the time. On 6 March 1927 Barbara heard signals from the Norwegian whaler, "Sir James Clark Ross", callsign AQE, at the South Pole. Also on the 19th she read signals from the British warship "Renown" while it was visiting New Zealand as part of a world tour (6 January to 27 June) with the Duke and Duchess of York on board. On the 11th she listened to Dance music from 2LO, London,



Commemoration card received from The National Broadcasting Committee in Canada. Heading photograph courtesy of Wireless World

being relayed by Gerry Marcuse, G2NM, from his home in Caterham on 90 metres. Barbara reported on several of these late night transmissions and sometimes Gerry would end his experimental transmissions with: "Hello Barbara, Goodnight, thanks very much for your reports which are very welcome."

Like many other wireless enthusiasts, Barbara took part in the solar eclipse tests between 0526 and 0717 on 29 June and logged 35 amateur and broadcast signals, mainly from the USA.

At 1726 on 9 March Barbara reported on signals from GLYK, the motor yacht "Adventuress", cruising in the English Channel. This yacht was fitted out with short-wave radio by Col Millard and F/lt Durrant, o/c WT, RAF Kidbrooke, who wrote to Barbara, as he had done before: "Thanks again for your lucid reports." Between 0449 and 0555 on the 23rd she heard WGY, the General Electric Co., New York, relaying the Tunney-Dempsey boxing match and on the following day she cut a picture from the Daily Mirror, taken during the first round of the fight and labelled, "transmitted by Marconi Wireless".

During October 1927, she heard a QSO between the British troopship SS "Dorsetshire", callsign GDKB, and Air Ministry, London, callsign GFA. Barbara often monitored the signals between these two stations and her reports to the RAF radio station at Kidbrooke were again, warmly acknowledged.

On 14 November she received a letter of appreciation from the research department of Marconi's Wireless Telegraph Co., Chelmsford, for her reception reports of signals from their Chelmsford station 5SW (used for Empire broadcasting) between noon on 5 November and midnight on the 11th.

The First YL

Among the more familiar amateur radio abbreviations are the letters YL which are instantly recognised as Young Lady, just as XYL means Wife and OM is Old Man. Digging into my archives I found a letter from the late John Clarricoats, G6CL, general secretary of RSGB, to Barbara Dunn, dated 2 May 1961, in which he explained that the first lady to hold a GPO amateur transmitting licence was a Mrs C. E. Ingram, callsign 1XI, of Ilford in 1913. Barbara joined the RSGB in September 1926 and in July 1927 applied for a transmitting licence. On 4 August she received a letter from the GPO saying that the PMG would grant her a transmitting licence for c.w. on 23m, 45m, 90m and 150-200 metres, providing she was able to "satisfy the PMG by examination as to your qualification in Morse working." This was no effort for Barbara and an entry in her log book on 19 August reads: "Did my Morse test at Chelmsford Post Office. Received at over 13 words per minute (sometimes quicker) and sent at 14 words per minute. Examiner said I'd done 'very well indeed.'" Barbara received her licence on 1 September and the callsign 6YL, later G6YL and made her first call to 6HV on 45 metres at 1529 on 16 November and remained a very active c.w. operator for more than 50 years.

Southern Cross

G6YL soon made many friends around the world and was noted for her scientific and meticulous approach to her radio operating and by 24 June 1930 her QSOs numbered 2122. Despite this heavy commitment to consistent contacts she took a break to play her part in the historic flight of the "Southern Cross", fifty years ago.

On 24 June 1930, four men led by an Australian, Captain Kingsford-Smith, a battle veteran of the Royal Flying Corps, set off in a Fokker monoplane named "Southern Cross", powered by three Wright Whirlwind engines, from Portmarnock Strand, near Dublin, for New York. Evidently Portmarnock was finally chosen for the departure because the Strand offered some 4km of runway, which it was felt the aircraft, weighing between eight and nine tonnes fully laden, needed for take off.

Extracts from G6YL's Log

1017 "Been shooting suns and things. Gee! it's icy cold outside. Bet Van and Smithy are feeling it. We are all wrapped up like polar explorers, but it's still pretty nippy."

To Wright Aeronautical Corporation, Peterson, New Jersey.
"The good old Whirlwinds are fine and good for thousands of miles yet."

1100 "Our position works out at 53.15N and 16.57W giving an average ground speed since leaving coast of 82 statute mph. This is satisfactory and leaves us a good margin. All aboard safe and cheerful. Revs 1675, airspeed 100, altitude 400ft" . . . Smith.

1136

To Fokker, Amsterdam,

"Cheerio and best wishes, Southern Cross behaving perfectly. Regards from all the boys" . . . Smithy.

1144 "Just been talking to SS George Washington."

1251

To Air Ministry, Den Haag, Holland . . .

"I send my regards to Dutch people, everything OK . . . Kingsford-Smith, Vandyke . . . Atlantic.

1308 VMZAB: "All OK."

1318 "Hope to see you in New York tomorrow PM, Vandyke and Kingsford-Smith."

1825 "About 1800 miles to go."

Wednesday, 25th

0010 "It's getting quite dark now inside the cabin. Cheerful glow of radio tube with its cherry red plate makes cabin look cosy. To complete the effect I think I'll wrap myself around another sandwich. Goodbye."

0022 "Well that was a jolly decent supper I think for this ship. A snappy chicken sandwich and a cup of coffee Royal. Not dark yet but we're fairly high, nearly 4000ft."

0045 "Getting darker now. The outboard motors are shrouded in blue haze and each exhaust port has a faint pink flame feathering from it. Very uncanny . . . The lettering on the starboard wing is embossed in gold as the last radiance from the western sky touches it."

0059 "Must try and get bearing from VCE now." (Cape Race callsign.)

0205 "Position: latitude, 48.12N longitude 45.5W, true course 254. Distance to go to Cape Race, 250 miles. Everybody happy and all OK . . . Smith."

0245 "Calling VCE, please listen 600m."

0315 "Can't raise VCE yet . . . many thanks but endeavouring to reach American territory before landing, Kingsford-Smith."

0402 "Only 100 miles off Cape Race and the stiff doesn't reply. It doesn't look as if we shall get a bearing just when we want it. We should be over Cape Race in an hour."

0505 "Sorry old boy, been messing about trying to get a bearing. Very dark. Flying blind. Motor ringed with flames. Still 160 miles from Cape Race. Dickens of a struggle to keep awake now. Drone makes us tired."

0509 "A faint streak of approaching dawn."

0519 "Shall have to try for more bearings now."

Captain Kingsford-Smith and his companions, Mr A. Vandyke, second pilot, Mr J. Stannage, wireless operator and Captain J. Saul, navigator, watched by some 10 000 people took off to loud cheers, around 0430 for their east west flight across the Atlantic ocean. Captain Kingsford-Smith made a perfect take off and the aircraft rose after a 2000 metre run.

Wireless Communications

The Southern Cross was equipped with two transmitters, one for 600m and the other for 33.3 metres and her in-flight messages, received by many radio amateurs, were co-ordinated at Magnet House, Kingsway, the London headquarters of the General Electric Company, in co-operation with the Radio Society of Great Britain. According to the *Newcastle Daily Journal*, 25 June 1930, a Dr Gordon Wilson, in London, was one of those picking up the messages and the paper said: "The three-valve set, which was entirely home-made, was working through an amplifier and loudspeaker. The Morse signals came through distinctly on a Ultra-Short wave of 33.3 metres."

"Girl's 30 Hours at Radio Set", was the headline on page 3 of the *Daily Express* newspaper, 27 June 1930, and continued: "The thrilling story of a Northumberland girl's 30-hour vigil at the dials of her wireless set while picking up signals from the Southern Cross during its Atlantic flight is revealed today." The report, referring to Barbara Dunn, described her as "an attractive girl in her early twenties." She told the reporter: "The whole thing was a most exciting experience, directly I received news from the General Electric Company in London that the Southern Cross had taken off, I tuned in my short-wave receiver to the 33-metre wavelength on which Mr Stannage was expected to transmit."

Barbara received her first message from the aircraft, callsign VMZAB, around 1015 when she read:

"To Smith, Longville, Sydney. Love to all, having a good trip but cold and some head winds."

Wonderful Wireless

According to press reports at the time, Ottawa station tried to give bearings to the Southern Cross at 0600 and it seems that the aircraft had been negotiating thickening fog for some time, in addition to their compass trouble, because part of a wireless message at 0945 from Kingsford-Smith said:

"Have been in very bad fog all night and trouble with the compass held us up quite a lot. Afraid we will have to land in Newfoundland or Nova Scotia for petrol after all."

The Southern Cross passed Cape Race and although Captain Kingsford-Smith was eager to push on to the American mainland, circumstances forced the plane to turn back and at 1000, the flyers informed Cape Race that they were hoping to reach Harbour Grace, Newfoundland and at 1013 the Southern Cross flew low over Bay Roberts' cable station, looking for Harbour Grace.

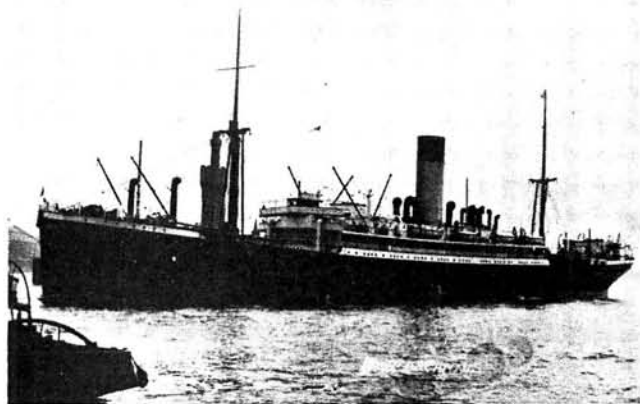
The very dense fog over the airfield prevented the plane from landing unaided and while she circled slowly down a wireless message, picked up by the Institute of Technology beam station at South Dartmouth, Mass, said:

"Please ring up Harbour Grace and ask them to send a pilot plane above the fog."

Very soon an aircraft from Harbour Grace found the Fokker hovering over the aerodrome and escorted her through the fog to a safe landing at 1053 and the completion of an approximately 31-hour trip. On arrival, Captain Kingsford-Smith said: "But for the wonderful wireless apparatus we should never have got out of the fog."

Her First VK

On 24 July she resumed normal DX working and among her contacts were ships' wireless operators, many of whom had their own amateur callsigns. By 12 November 1931 she had made more than 3200 QSOs and began an experiment in propagation with John R. Witty, G5WQ, while he was travelling as a passenger on the Blue Funnel Line, TSS "Ascanius" from Las Palmas, via Capetown, to Melbourne from 13 November to 22 December. John, from Great Crosby, Liverpool, installed a two-valve receiver, known as an OV1, comprising a screened grid detector and one l.f. stage, fed by a half-wave doublet aerial only 1.22m above his cabin roof, to listen for



HMS Ascanius—received from John R. Witty G5WQ

G6YL's signals on 7MHz and 14MHz. At the end of the journey he sent her a detailed log and a special home-made QSL card.

According to the list of experimental stations in the RSGB Annual, 1928, ships' stations with amateur calls place an "X" before their usual prefixes. In view of this rule and a study of Barbara's log I can only assume that the callsign of the Ascanius was X1.YJ because on 16 December she worked XX1.YJ, her first in VK6, when the ship was off Cape Leenwin, Western Australia and on the 18th she had her first QSO in VK5 when XX1.YJ was half way across the Great Australian Bight.

RSGB Award

At the 1930 RSGB Convention, Barbara Dunn was awarded the 1930 Committee Cup for outstanding work in the first series of 1.7MHz tests and became the first YL to hold an RSGB trophy.

"My station is c.w. only. I don't like phones," she told me back in 1974 and by then she had made more than 15 000 QSOs and dozens of awards.

I think that it was this fascination she had for c.w. that made Barbara Dunn one of the finest amateur radio operators of this century. ●